



Academy and the Female Legacy: A Critical Study of Adrienne Rich's Selected Prose

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Abstract

Through varied significant and strategic ways male, the patriarch has been able to keep captive not only the physical but also intellectual and psychological potential of a female being. And this hegemonic ideology got strengthened and promoted via social structures. As a consequence, significant ways and means of discrimination and disempowerment of the female race got embedded in the very foundations of these socio-political institutions. In this connection, the Academy embodies a symbolic significance along socio-historical lines. As an important cultural institute, the academy has been pivotal in shaping, generating and disseminating knowledge and other cultural artefacts. Throughout the ages, under the colossal impact of androcentrism, it has been the bastion of masculine power and privilege. Female writers and theoreticians across cultures have attempted a critique of the academy for its biased role in gatekeeping female agency. Adrienne Rich, an acclaimed theoretician, has attempted an exhaustive analysis of this cultural institution in promoting gender discrimination and entrapment of the female gender. Therefore, the present paper is an attempt to critically analyse Rich's radical critique of androcentric knowledge -its structural and operational components. This paper analyses the strategies Rich recommends for a feminist re-evaluation of the academy. Besides feminist theorising, the paper makes judicious use of Rich's own theoretical pronouncements as articulated in her seminal books, "Blood, Bread and Poetry" and "On Lies, Secrets and Silences"

Keywords— Academy, Gatekeeping, Curriculum, Androcentric, Repository

Patriarchy has exercised a significant and considerable influence in shaping and governing social institutions. These institutions, in turn, through their social stipulations and norms, have appropriated masculinity as the only powerful 'natural' category. As a consequence, these structures precipitated modes of discrimination and disempowerment of the female gender.

Among these cultural institutions, academic organizations wield prominent authority, as they generate and disseminate cultural norms into social spaces. With their inception during Platonic times, androcentric beliefs and practices formed the bedrock of the academy. As a result, it became not only a repository of patriarchal values, but also served its

purpose in generating, validating and appropriating male-centered subjective knowledge. This androcentric approach achieved objectivity by virtue of 'man' being the representative of human race. With the passage of time, this knowledge idealized the male principle as the norm, thereby relegating the female experience to the margin.

During classical times, the academy remained solely under the reigns of masculine figures. While foregrounding the structural basis and formulating varied forms of knowledge, these academicians relied on the masculine intellect for governance and control. It preferred a domineering curriculum that weaved different myths, anecdotes and stories to propagate androcentric ideals and practices. These biased

foundations established the academy as a strategic male domain that favored masculine content and style.

And it is in line with this practice that the female writer has been continuously fighting to get access, invade and transform this tradition for the advancement of their gender.

Under the cumulative effect of historical gender difference, the academy passed this androcentric legacy across continents. Europe too witnessed a partisan education till the 15th century. Under the influence of this biased discourse rooted in classically informed philosophies, English traditions favored anti-women rhetoric for centuries.

However, the birth of the Renaissance, with its renewed interest in learning paved the way for humanistic education across the continent. Elizabethan England too saw birth of a few female poets, writers, pamphleteers, theoreticians on its literary horizon. These include Margaret Tyler (1540- 1590), Lady Mary Wroth (1587-1652), Emilia

Lanier (1559-1645), Jane Anger (1560-1600), Rachel Speght (1597-?), Elizabeth Cary (1585-1639) etc. The American continent too witnessed the birth of female voices like Anne Hutchinson (1591-1643) and Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672) etc. Their selective entry into churches, monasteries and institutions failed to exercise a summative influence on the general temperament of the people. Despite their stiff resistance to masculine discourses of dominance, their radical writings couldn't quell the debate "Querle des femmes". The academic indifference and hostility meted out to these authors and their works significantly gained impetus during Elizabeth Tudor's reign. More than this, the establishment apathy, social stagnation and religious reproach associated with women's education was a great handicap in revolutionizing education. John Winthrop's crucial description of Anne Hutchinson's personality reflects the general social and religious taboos attached with a female intellect. His abominable analysis of Hutchinson's life is a remarkable predicament of Puritan times. In the essay "A Puritan Opinion of Literary Women" Winthrop writes: "a godly young woman and of special parts, who was fallen into sad infirmity, lost her understanding, and reason, which had been growing upon her diverse years, by occasion of her giving herself wholly to reading and writing many books" (On Lies 33).

This male hegemony of the academy got bolstered in the philosophical writings of different male authors.

Through their pioneering theoretical and philosophical insights, philosophers like Rene Descartes, Immanuel Kant, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau furthered these gendered foundations in the modern European education. Rousseau's ideas regarding female education shaped the philosophical foundations of progressive education. Thus, this differentiation between the academic needs of men and women, paved the way for marginalization of women and helped jeopardize the scant chances of free education for women. This resulted in a long intellectual blockade of women and had far reaching consequences on female empowerment and freedom. Women's failure to register their admittance in formal schooling helped male students to monopolize the academy till the end of the 18th century. The academy appropriated for its female students, a distinct curriculum that appealed more to heart than to head, so as to carve out an elegant wife from a promising student. However, male hegemony met stiff resistance from various women authors and poets in the 18th century England. Mary Wollstonecraft, an academic practitioner and a pioneer theoretician, studied the patriarchal legacy of the academy. While observing long term benefits of patriarchal decision to disallow women to pursue higher education, she calls this intellectual bankruptcy as the cause for women's oppression.

In beginning of the 19th century, women throughout Europe began to pursue education as the prime vehicle for their self-liberation and autonomy. The Bronte Sisters, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and others were seminal in refuting the rigid dichotomy between the educational needs of men and women, that pervaded the academy. In her letter to W S Williams (July 3, 1849) Charlotte Bronte describes education as the only tool to confront patriarchal exploitation of a woman. She writes, "an education secured is an advantage gained- a priceless advantage, come what may, it is a step towards independency (226). Similarly, Elizabeth Barrett Browning takes a strong dig at the prevalent masculine dictum regarding the infirmity of her race. Recording her impatience with the curricula that resulted in passive reciprocity of learners, Browning proclaims that, "women want to be made to think actively, their apprehension is quicker than that of men, but their difference lies for the most part in the logical faculty and in the higher mental activities" (qtd. in Rich 231). These authors shared a joint venture to defy the axiom about the innate nature of women's mind and body in conflict with intellectual training.

The 20th century witnessed a promising activism in feminist circles which resulted in free access of women to higher education. Modernization with its set standards armed women with new critical queries and strategies. This helped the first wave feminists to launch a subtle analysis of the academy through a feminist lens. Mostly avid readers and practical theoreticians, these feminists fathomed out the strong foundations of the academy and portrayed it as the most crucial and relevant arena of women's emancipation. The most prominent modern voices include Virginia Woolf, Hilda Doolittle, Mina Loy and innumerable poets, suffragists, and political leaders who questioned the established intellectual structures as well as the prevalent "humanistic" contents of education. Through her path-breaking essays "A Room of One's Own" (1929) and "Three Guineas" (1938), Virginia Woolf not only assesses the damage done to women learners by the academy in the past but also predicts the present and future of academic pursuits of society in general and women in particular. These theoretical and critical concerns shared by first wave feminists sent shock tremors within the structural organization of the academy. This inspired academic feminists to invade it on newer lines and issues. Similar voices of dissent were echoed by academic poets and writers like Elaine Showalter, Kate Millett, Audre Lorde etc.

In their socio-psychological theories they questioned the validity and relevance of the academy with respect to their gender. These writers thematized domestic arenas and feminine themes hitherto tabooed by the academy. They invested in women's writing with an academic fervor and cadence and imbibed with feministic issues and concerns, their writing won canonical authenticity. This overwhelming response signaled the end of masculine rule in the academy and the embarking of radical feminists on the threshold of the contemporary academy.

Among these Adrienne Rich, a potent figure, has an enviable critical reputation for her progressive, albeit radical views about formal education. Like other feminists, Rich grounds her critical and theoretical stance in her personal and professional experience. A promising child, Rich cherished a rich but crucial lifelong relationship with the academy. Since her infancy, childhood and youth, she stood very close to the academy and became a daily witness to its vibrant environs, vital academics and crucial processes that operate within it.

Early in her childhood Rich met a regressive academic

setting at her parental house. Arnold Rice Rich, her father, a masculine Radcliffe elite and a patriarch, reflected a distinctive concern about his daughter's life and education. As a promising child, Rich offered her father the opportunity to achieve his social advancement. As a consequence, Arnold Rich expressed a great interest in her education. Significantly he chose John Donne, Robert Frost, W H Auden etc. the prominent voices of the academic tradition, to stimulate her academic appetite. Talking about these primary but significant influences on her juvenile psyche, Rich writes in "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision" (1971), "my own luck was being born... white and middle-class into a house full of books, with a father who encouraged me to read and write" (On Lies 38). With these haunting experiences, Rich leaves the kingdom of her father, for her voyage into a formal academy. Raised like a son, Rich was admitted to elite institutes like Ronald Park Country School, Radcliffe, Harvard etc. The vibrant academics flourishing amidst thrilling environs cast a spell on the author's young psyche. In a fascinating relationship with the academy, the author began to visualize the enormous potential of education in transforming the human race. Thus, filled with uncommon expectations of success and reward, Rich immersed herself in the prevalent formalism of the academy to cultivate a 'historical sense' in Eliot's terminology (Eliot 71).

Rich attaches a crucial significance to the academy after the family in establishing and perpetuating patriarchy. In a systematic way, the academy under patriarchal influence carves out a social adult out of a young learner. However, this socialization process spontaneously takes place after studying a graded content embodying the most 'universal' human experience that exclusively incorporates the masculine gender. In a way, academy in league with patriarchy, appropriates a selective but derogatory use of the female subject. This celebration of the male principle at the cost of the female, engraves a life-long influence on the tender psyche of a primary learner. Under this colossal impact a girl child incorporates masculine traits and values.

Rich opines that this process of indoctrination permeates every sphere of education. A mature woman student with deeply ingrained convictions of primary education encounters a different kind of patriarchy in the higher education system. Either as a learner or a worker, she faces many problems which seem to be trivial and useless to trustees, but for a female student

they come as a destructive blow to their poised bodies. For Rich these events lead to, “outright insults and intellectual sabotage” (On Lies 207).

This disastrous impact which the academy has had on female history, self and identity makes it a contesting battleground for women. As a female contender, Rich took the task to undertake a critical observation of the academy. With experiences of an ‘obedient’ child, a mature student and a professional practitioner, Rich resolved to comprehend the academy in its inclusiveness. While analyzing the function of the academy, she observed that knowledge is associated with power and its accumulation across historical times empowers a human being in his/her life. However, an inextricable connection exists between knowledge and experience, which in turn shapes the knowledge to be disseminated in the academy. The academy, since its inception favors universal masculine experience, experienced by the male about both males and females; this led Rich to suggest that biased and astigmatic knowledge shared by the academy in general empowers men to exercise control and domination over women. In this connection, she bases her argument on the seminal observations put forth by Kathleen Gough regarding male power in society. In essay “The Origin of the Family” (1971) Gough talks about the ways in which the male exerts power over the female. While tracing the historical trajectory of masculine hegemony, Gough concludes that male power is being exerted through different ways and methods. In exercising his influence and terror on woman, Gough believes man has been exploiting the physical body of women but has been able to keep captive her psychological potential. And it is being achieved by resorting to “cramp their creativeness, or to withhold from them large areas of the society’s knowledge and cultural attainments” (qtd. in Journal of Marriage and Family 138).

As a keen insider within the academy, Rich argues that this kind of disempowerment of female gender is mostly undertaken within the boundaries of the academy. Describing academy as a stronghold of masculinity, she argues that it not only manifests masculine power but maintains and enacts it in every sphere of its influence. Rich believes patriarchy has managed to strangle women’s creative endeavors and has prevented them from cherishing knowledge and other cultural attainments.

And in this way the academy has contributed in exercising male authority by way of “control of consciousness” (Blood 39). Thus, Rich consumes a

major portion of her theoretical work in exposing the hidden and inherent potential of the academy in constructing and precipitating gender differences. Most of her essays “Toward a Woman Centered University” (1973-74), “Claiming an Education” (1977), “Taking Women Students Seriously” (1978) and “The soul of a Women’s College” (1984), reveal a plethora of exploitative mechanisms which have been prevalent in the academy. With perfect instances, literary allusions and statistical data, Rich pleads the case before her fellow women learners and writers of considering the inhibitive role the traditional academy had been playing in their lives. She asks them to take a serious look at the academy’s role in changing lives in general and abolishing the status quo regarding gender difference. All these brazen revelations succinctly sum up the manifesto of Rich’s radical critique of the academy. It is in this context that Rich describes the modern academy as “a bastion of male power and privilege” (On Lies 126) which is not only insidious but also surreptitiously veiled and needs to be comprehended, analyzed, invaded and rebuild.

Rich, though a feminist critic par excellence, always foregrounded her critical and theoretical concerns in experiences that were either personal or women inclusive. As an insider within the academy, she developed a crucial understanding of the teaching and learning process. Her subtle analysis revealed that the structural and operational mechanisms of the academy operate in a hierarchical setup to achieve intended purposes. Fathered by colossal patriarchs, whom Rich describes “Trustees of the board”, the academy embarks on a pro- masculine ideological mission under their constant vigil. In their vested interests, these trustees run operational procedures, which include promotion of curriculum or content, the agency to execute the curricula and the style for obtaining desired ends.

In her critical investigation of the academy, Rich attaches utmost significance to curriculum. Describing curriculum “as the invisible and marginal agent of culture” (On Lies, 141), Rich believes it is a potent tool that carries the hidden assumptions of the academy. From antiquity to the present, the academy has managed to utilize a distinct curriculum that weaves women’s marginality. In its twin aspects, written as well as unwritten form, curriculum has been enshrined with the power of social acculturation for women.

To prove her point, Rich asks women for a comprehensive comparative historical analysis of the curriculum that academy has put in practice from time

to time. Juxtaposing the contents used by the academy in past and present times, Rich finds an identical pattern in the practices at the academy. The curriculum used in the past and the content prevalent in contemporary times, embodies inherent prejudices towards female experience. The academized canon thus used resulted in a gradual extinction of the feminine principle throughout history.

Studying the cause of obscurity and distortion of the female principle in canon formation, Rich visualizes a politically motivated and ideologically driven force operating within the academy. And this force not only managed to exclude female experience as unnecessary and irrelevant, but also resorted to enforced erasure of their experience at one or the other pretext. Rich confronts this eraser in her famous poem, "Diving into the wreck" by making a voyage into the academy with precise tools and techniques.

Thus, Rich argues that the academy has been and still remains under the ideological grip of this tradition which continuously revives itself by devaluing, censoring and erasing women's experience as central to their

survival. Describing this legacy "as the ideology of white male supremacists, a construct of male subjectivity" (Blood 3) Rich asks women to confront this ideology in the contemporary academy. Elite institutes under the guise of contemporary challenges, approve a curriculum that leads to the "procession of sons of educated men" as put forth by Virginia Woolf. Instead of making current curriculum women-centered, it still remains not only "manmade... but masculine in its mentality" (On Lies 135). The elite institutes take pride in the distinct content that promises bright career opportunities and future employability to its women students. Rich remains critical of this kind of curriculum, as it serves as a key for economic gains only, which secure a woman's endangered social space in current times but keeps them ignorant of important social and cultural processes that weave their subjugation.

As a critical thinker, Rich became aware of the peculiar use of language that androcentric curriculum uses even in ordinary classroom situations.

Taking heed from her academic women mentors she observed that language can be used as a means of changing reality. However, her experience at Search for Education, Evaluation, Knowledge (SEEK), program brought her in direct contact with the distinct use of language that academy achieves while disseminating a

biased curriculum to a marginalized species. At SEEK, language was used with the purpose to employ it as a tool to achieve freedom and an aid to help oppressed students to express themselves, either orally or via a written medium, but critical observations led her to the conclusion that the approved canon by thematizing a contradictory reality than their own social one, robs off the power of language, vocabulary and its nuances from learners.

Thus, the current curriculum serves the purpose of the male trustee. In her revolutionary call to women for radical invasion of the academy,

Rich recommends a thorough and critical analysis of the role that a masculine teacher plays within the traditional academy. From her early career Rich became apprehensive of the position of a masculine teacher. Later, she read Emlyn William's play, *The Corn is Green* (1938), which dramatizes the colossal impact of a mentor's personality on the maturing minds of his learners. The hovering impact got corroborated with her experience at the SEEK program. The impact was augmented by her interaction with elite academia which revealed to her the vantage position and authority that a teacher embodies. Rich began to consider that out of this ideal position in the tripolar process of teaching and learning, the masculine teacher coordinates and controls the actual classroom situation. And out of this position the male teacher reinforces patriarchy "for an oppressor lecturing on oppression, becomes morally suspect" (Ruthven 115).

To understand her critique of the masculine teacher, Rich asks women to understand the real perspective of the teaching and learning process in her times. She believes teaching as a unique relationship between the teacher and taught is an indivisible one. For Rich, education acquires a new meaning in modern times. Education doesn't restrict itself to only making learners go through credit hours and tests to qualify for a special role to be played by the learners.

Rich believes the relationship between teacher and learner is a unique one that is not only emotional but also ethical and intellectual. The word "ethical and intellectual" acquires a new meaning in Rich's context. Since intellectual means denying blind adherence to tradition, rather than making a renewed and a fresh study and making use of logic, reason and felt experiences. Ethicality involves exemplary use of honesty and justice while enriching a relationship. Teachers teaching within a particular classroom situation must combine this twin novelty in

structuring and assessing the student's academic needs.

However, Rich believes both ethicality and intellectual concerns become a casualty when a male teacher takes the assignment. Caught in a patriarchal set up, of whom the male professor is a symbolic figure, he fails to establish a connecting chord with female students. Robert Hall and Bernice Sander are of the view that the male teacher with his elegant style and behavioral tactics, while lecturing, masculinizes the classroom culture which hampers the behavioral style of a girl student, thereby affecting their academic achievements. While analyzing and describing the regular phenomenon of life, a male teacher spontaneously alludes to androcentric myths, biased instances and approaches. As a result, a social reality is created that centers around male privilege to the extent of exclusion of women which leads to "psychic disequilibrium" (Blood 99). Thus, a model male teacher consciously endorses cultural gender stereotypes by exhibiting his behavioral tactics in the class. Since this would "glamorize the male teacher which enhances the chances of emotional gratification and in certain cases sexual exploitation" (Blood 101).

Rich's queries about the academy have proved crucial for feminist literary criticism also. Her theorization of the academy and its apparent mechanisms and biases about female gender nourished the critical insights of women writers and female theoreticians. For her powerful critique of the academy, she became an inspirational mentor to radical voices in contemporary feminist discourse. Summing her influence on feminist literary criticism Liz Yorke writes:

indeed, her powerful critical assessment was to inspire the new field of feminist literary studies and lent force to the creation of a new model for critical enquiry which was to bring race, gender, class and feminism from the margins to the center of literary endeavor" (Yorke 8).

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